SURPRISE

November 29, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 64:1-8
Mark 13:32-37

"Watch--for you do not know when the master of the house will come,..."
-Mark 13:35(RSV)

Six hundred million dollars. That is the 1987 retail sales estimate for the North Michigan Avenue area, and much of it will change hands during the next four weeks. **$600,000,000.** That is a lot of money. It's no wonder we are emblazoned with white lights and color and frantic festivity. And the question that presents itself to the Christian community today is this: "How in the world can we do or say anything with a chance of being noticed in the midst of this festival? How are we going to get a word in edgewise in the next four weeks?

In many ways it is the most difficult season for us. It is surely the most subtle. Ministers and church musicians learn to be wary of it because the world is already celebrating Christmas and, - according to our calendar, it hasn't come yet. It is Advent and one of the things the Christian church has felt most consistently over its 2,000 year existence is that Christmas requires a time of intentional preparation. But the world is already celebrating. People want to sing carols. I understand. I can recall my own youthful exasperation about it.

I have always loved Christmas and everything about it. You'll never hear me complaining about the appearance of Christmas decorations too early. I love it when the first tree or wreath appears in Indian Summer to remind me of what is coming. I do discipline myself to not play Christmas music until Thanksgiving. But for me, at least, Christmas begins in earnest at about 6:00 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day.

So I used to get exasperated... I had a job on weekends at J. C. Penney one year. I worked back in the rear, where they sold work clothes - heavy flannel jackets for the deer hunters. J. C. Penney had two Christmas records that year, 45s - Perry Como singing "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and Percy Faith doing a jazzed-up version of "Deck the Halls" and "Joy to the World." Over and over I heard them. They are still burned into my memory. And I do recall my exasperation on Sunday morning when I went to church for the "real stuff," and what I got was some obscure hymns I didn't know, in a minor key...

"O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here..."

That's what I thought had happened to me - "mourning in lonely exile on a hard Presbyterian pew, while everyone else had the good sense to be singing 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing.'"

Why do we do it? Well, for one thing it just may be that if we pulled out the stops, and tried to compete for attention with that $600,000,000 bonanza, if we had a live Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in the Garth, twenty-four hours a day, with real sheep and cows and the morning choir hovering angelically on the manse roof, singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" - if we took a page from that book we just might fall on our faces. And then again, we just might succeed and that would be worse than making fools of ourselves because if we succeeded, we would miss the point of the whole business in the first place. The point is that once upon a time God came into the world - in darkness and silence, in modesty and restraint in a way almost nobody noticed. The point of the whole business is a subtle one; namely that God can be counted on to continue coming into the world. The point is, it is still possible to miss it, because of its quietness and modesty and subtlety.

So it is Advent. With a joy so profound I can never fit it into words, we enter into a period of waiting and anticipating. Just as everybody turns out the lights in order to see the birthday candles better, so in Advent the church goes intentionally into the darkness - in order better to see the light of the world.

You see what Advent is about is the most amazing idea anyone ever had, namely that God, the Creator and the ruler of the universe, comes into your life and mine and the life of the world with great love and power and hope and enormous potential. The most amazing idea of all is that the one who creates all of us, knows each of us - intimately: comes into our lives with creative love, just as He came into the startled lives of Mary and Joseph. The most amazing idea of all is that God is no stranger to the human condition, that God came into our humanness and therefore knows about humanness - about ecstasy and despair, about joy and sadness, about hope and grief.

The oldest and most primal human prayer, even before there is a theology, is one that comes out of the extremities of the human situation: "**O, God, make it right.**" Everyone of us has prayed that prayer or a variation on the theme. "Make it right, make her well, give him back to me, make me victorious, make me successful, make justice, make enough food to eat... make it right."

The prophet Isaiah pled with God, 2,500 years ago: "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down..." "Make your name known to your adversaries," which means, make it right, square things with your enemies (who, by the way, happen to be my enemies also). The situation to which Isaiah wrote was, in fact, captivity and exile. God's chosen people had

been exiled, pushed around, humiliated and treated with contempt. Now they found themselves virtually in house arrest in a foreign land that they hated. And so they prayed every night, "O God, make it right."

If that's the oldest prayer, the oldest theological quandary related to it is - "If there is a God, why isn't he making it right?" Why don't I see some evidence - some mercy, justice, kindness? Why, if there is a God, is there all this sadness and tragedy in the world?" Every age asks that question. Five hundred years before Christ the prophet asked it.

In our day it is asked by the poets and artists, in theater and sometimes in comedy because preachers and theologians are not brave enough to give it full voice. Theologians pay attention to Woody Allen, for instance, because this question runs through much of his work. For many people (me among them), Woody Allen is a contemporary Isaiah who in many ways and through many cinema characters pleads - "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down."

And Lily Tomlin's wonderful bag lady Trudy, who I have quoted before...

> "One thing I have no worry about is whether God exists.
> But it has occurred to me that God has Alzheimers and has
> forgotten that we exist."

"O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down."

The early Christian community asked the question and prayed the prayer. The time immediately after Jesus was bleak. They were powerless in the face of Roman hostility. They were nothing but a minor nuisance the empire had decided to eliminate. And when they got together, they recalled the ancient promise of the Day of the Lord, when God would act decisively and defeat all the nation's enemies. They recalled the words of Jesus about God's Kingdom coming into the world. And out of that came an idea which was almost immediately a problem for them and which has confused Christians ever since... The return of Jesus Christ: the Second Coming.

The problem has resulted when the two ideas joined: i.e. the decisive act of God to make things right and the coming of Christ. People who interpret literally here, past and present, often sell all their belongings and stand around waiting for the end of the world. They were doing it in Thessalonica in the First Century and they're still doing it. The simple fact is that the world didn't come to an end and Jesus didn't come back as they believed he would and as he seemed to be saying he would... unless, of course, he meant something else; unless he has come again and again and again.

And yet, every so often, Christian people fasten onto the idea of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age with a zeal bordering on obsession. Usually it is in times of stress, turmoil, persecution and oppression. Whenever the future looks grave the idea of the return of Jesus and the end of the world sounds pretty good. So today - there are people who lift the 13th Chapter of Mark out of the First Century and try to fit it into the front page of the Chicago Tribune. And when Mark

says Jesus said "nation will rise up against nation" - these folk read in Iraq and Iran, or Russia and the United States or Israel and Lebanon, and when Mark says Jesus predicted calamities and tribulation these folk read in Ethiopia famine and California earthquakes. And it's not long until everybody is convinced that this is it, particularly in that we do now have the capacity to create our own Armageddon with a mushroom cloud umbrella over it. That's potent stuff and it continues to sell a lot of books.

Madeleine L'Engle, ordinarily the gentlest of Christians, gets angry about the equation of the Second Coming with nuclear disaster.

"That cannot be," she writes. "Of one thing only am I certain: the Second Coming is an action of love. The judgment of God is the judgment of love... To equate it with nuclear holocaust is to expect God to curse creation, not to bless; to look for hell, not heaven, which is a kind of blasphemy, for we are called to live in hope." [A Stone for a Pillow, p. 117]

Interestingly, Jesus will not be pinned down on the subject. The climax of the 13th Chapter of Mark is not the revelation of the date, time and method - but the open-ended and hopeful mandate to "Watch" - to anticipate - to be alert and ready - for the Lord's coming.

And a good thing too because we didn't do so good with the first coming. After all, no one much noticed it. Herod, of course, understood all too well the ultimate threat the Jewish infant posed to his authority. Those Eastern mystics with their heads in the stars knew that something mysterious was going on. And the shepherds, the social misfits spending their lives outside the perimeters of polite society, seem to have noticed something peculiar going on in Bethlehem. But that's about it. No one else caught it: not the merchants, not the crowd at the bar at the Inn, not the census takers, not the priests, not even the inn-keeper whose year-end profit and loss statement was going to look a lot healthier because of all the census-business. And later, as the story plays out, he is not exactly overwhelmingly recognized by anybody - except a few folk, here and there, again mostly the disreputable outcasts whose credibility was taken seriously by no one. So his advice to his disciples to watch and be alert and awake - so as not to miss his coming again, was well taken.

What is there that relates to that? Try this. "Surely, it's not here already," we are heard to say. The nearly unusual response to the season is a kind of hackneyed surprise. "Here it comes again - seems like it was just Labor Day. I haven't even begun to think Christmas and here it is." One morning you wake up and and the twinkling lights are on and the Hancock tree is up. We're never ready - even for this glitzy part, it seems, and that's precisely the point. The event itself... this extraordinary birth - is always a surprise - as are all the comings and goings of God into life.

Where? Where exactly does God rend the heavens and come down?

Well, history and our own experience teach us that God doesn't come like an avenging army; that for all the praying down across the centuries to make it right, God isn't in the business of rearranging natural

processes and historic forces to do favors for his children. God's coming into those situations when we feel desperate and cry for help is subtle, quiet and unobtrusive. God comes and changes people, brings redemptive possibility into the most hopeless of circumstances.

From the Nazi prison where he was held and where he died, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote -

> "A prison cell in which one waits, hopes, and is completely dependent is not a bad picture of Advent." [Letters and Papers From Prison, p. 416]

God's coming into the world, Bonhoeffer, discovered, is not confined to happy family parties, with Christmas tree, gifts, and all the trimmings, but becomes very real in the darkness and isolation of a prison cell.

Jesus Christ has come again, and the promise of Advent is that Jesus Christ will continue to come again, not simply on some future Armageddon, but - into our world with creative potential now, and into the hearts and minds and souls of people...now, people who are impatient with war and planning for war and whose hopefulness is expressed in an insistent demand for peace. That is a coming of Jesus Christ. When the negotiators actually get it done, and take a step and sign a document, angels sing and shepherds quake and Christ comes.

And when ordinary people can simply no longer tolerate the injustice our system has created for the poor, and who demand that somehow we deal with homelessness and education and employment - Christ, friend of the poor, is coming again.

And when ordinary people see a portion of the population which has been isolated by convention and now is condemned to die alone of AIDS and say, "this is not right," and begin to do something about it, the one who reached across so many societal taboos has come again... When hope simply refuses to die in the world - Jesus Christ comes again.

Be alert...awake...watch. Jesus Christ is coming into your life, as well as the life of the world.

One of my favorite Frederick Buechner observations, which has meant a great deal to me, is this one -

> "Listen to what's happening in your own life... Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes, even if you don't know why the tears are there. Listen to your life." [Christian Century, 11/83]

So it happens... Christ comes... You're in the hospital elevator, on the way down from oncology and the door opens onto obstetrics and you hear a new born cry...

-or you're sitting in the sanctuary, your mind wandering and you hear "Amazing Grace" and you know it is from God to you...

-or you're in the hellish captivity of a broken relationship, and from deep within yourself you feel the power to forgive or to ask forgiveness...

-or you're alone, in exile, in darkness and someone reaches in and holds your hand and in that hand you feel God's hand and you know that Jesus comes again and again and again.

It is the most amazing idea anyone ever had. The Creator comes into the creation. The one who made us all - loves us each and comes to us each. The future - regardless of what it holds - will be one into which Jesus Christ will come.

Historians think there may have been a kind of cryptic code word by which those first Christians identified each other. An intriguing remnant remains in the New Testament; a simple Aramaic phrase - "Marantha" which means "Come Quickly."

"Come Quickly - Lord Jesus." We may be so distracted by the lights and loud music and brilliant colors of the season that we miss it...

So let us pray the prayer...
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come with peace to our world.

Come with reconciliation to our nation and our city.
Come with healing to our relationships.
Come into our lives with your love and joy and strength and hope.
Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.